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Contrastivism and Anti-Individualism Part II: A Further Response to Aikin and Dabay

Sarah Sawyer, University of Sussex

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Aikin and Dabay accept my claim that a subject *S*'s contrastive knowledge of the proposition that she ψ s that *p* requires there to be a *positive contrast class*—the set of propositions in contrast to which *S* knows that she ψ s that *p*—and a *negative contrast class*—the set of propositions in contrast to which *S* does not know that she ψ s that *p*. Put in terms of concepts, contrastive self-knowledge requires, as Aikin and Dabay put it (2014b, 1):

- (i) that the knower, *S*, possess a concept, *C*, that occurs in the proposition she knows;
- (ii) that there be a set of positively contrasting concepts to *C*; and
- (iii) that there be a set of negatively contrasting concepts to *C*.

I have previously argued that condition (iii) can only be satisfied if anti-individualism is true (Sawyer 2014b). The possibility of negatively contrasting concepts, I maintain, depends on an anti-individualistic understanding of concepts, and hence contrastive self-knowledge entails anti-individualism. Aikin and Dabay disagree. According to them, an individualistic understanding of concepts also allows for negatively contrasting concepts, and hence contrastive self-knowledge does not entail anti-individualism.

Aikin and Dabay's argument turns on a distinction they draw between the claim that *S cannot have* a set of negatively contrasting concepts on an individualist's account of concepts—a claim which they concede I have proved—and the claim that *there cannot be* a set of negatively contrasting concepts on the individualist's account of concepts—a claim which they think is false, but which they think is required if my argument from contrastive self-

knowledge to anti-individualism is to go through (Aikin and Dabay 2014b, 1). In this response, I argue that Aikin and Dabay have misunderstood the notion of a negatively contrasting concept, and that this misunderstanding leads them to think that negatively contrasting concepts are consistent with individualism when in fact they are not. The distinction they draw between a negatively contrasting concept being possessed by *S*, on the one hand, and a negatively contrasting concept being possessed by someone other than *S* (and hence there being such a concept), on the other, ultimately rests on a confusion.

For the purposes of clarification, here is an explicit definition of a negatively contrasting concept:

(NCC) A concept C^* negatively contrasts with a concept C for a subject S at time t if and only if the proposition $p(C^*)$ is an epistemic counterpart for S at t of the proposition $p(C)$, where (i) $p(C)$ is a proposition that S knows (contrastively) at t , and (ii) $p(C^*)$ differs from $p(C)$ only in the substitution of C^* for C .

And we can define an epistemic counterpart proposition as follows:

(ECP) The proposition $p(C^*)$ is an epistemic counterpart for S at t of the proposition $p(C)$ if and only if were S at t to know the proposition that $p(C^*)$ instead of the proposition that $p(C)$, S would be in a qualitatively indistinguishable state at t .

The notion of a negatively contrasting concept, then, is relative to a concept in a proposition known (contrastively) by a subject at a time. The notion of a negatively contrasting concept is a counterfactual one defined in terms of indistinguishability at the subjective level. With this definition in hand, we can look at Aikin and Dabay's argument in more detail.

Aikin and Dabay maintain that an individualist can allow for negatively contrasting concepts, because although a subject S cannot possess a concept that negatively contrasts with her own, a different individual R can possess such a concept. Here is what they say:

As Sawyer points out, although S may use the symbol ' C ' to designate the concept she has, she cannot distinguish C from the set of negatively contrasting concepts ($NC1$, $NC2$, $NC3$, ...). For the individualist, this means that the concept S actually has is not

the concept *C*, but the broader concept *CVNC1VNC2VNC3V...* All of this establishes that *S* cannot have a set of negatively contrasting concepts for the disjunctive concept she has, because any such concept would be included in the disjunctive concept and therefore would no longer contrast with *S*'s concept.

However, ... there is no in principle barrier to another subject, *R*, having such a set of concepts. So long as *R* can distinguish at least one set of disjuncts in *S*'s disjunctive concept from another set of disjuncts, *R* will have at least two concepts that are both distinct from *S*'s disjunctive concept and such that *S* cannot distinguish them from *S*'s own disjunctive concept. (2014b, 1).

Let us suppose, then, that *R* has both the concept *NC1* and the concept *NC2*. Aikin and Dabay make two claims: first, that *R*'s concepts *NC1* and *NC2* are distinct from *S*'s concept *CVNC1VNC2VNC3V...*; and, second, that *S* cannot distinguish *R*'s concepts from her own. From this they conclude that there is a set of negatively contrasting concepts to *S*'s concept, which means that an individualist account of concepts can satisfy condition (iii) above, and hence that contrastive self-knowledge does not entail anti-individualism. Their argument, however, does not work. The first claim is, of course, true—*R*'s concepts *NC1* and *NC2* are indeed distinct from *S*'s concept—but the crucial second claim is either irrelevant or false, depending on how “*S* cannot distinguish *R*'s concepts from her own” is understood. Let us look in more detail at this second claim.

The first sense of “*S* cannot distinguish *R*'s concepts from her own” is the sense discussed by Aikin and Dabay, illustrated in detail by their examples of differences between second-, and third-personal statements. On this reading (roughly) *S* cannot distinguish *R*'s concepts from her own because she does not possess those concepts. I entirely agree that *S* cannot distinguish *R*'s concepts from her own in this sense. But the point is irrelevant. It is irrelevant because it is insufficient to establish that *NC1* and *NC2* are negatively contrasting concepts to *S*'s concept. As such, it fails to establish that an individualist account of concepts can satisfy condition (iii) above, and hence that contrastive self-knowledge does not entail anti-individualism. We can see that it fails to establish that *NC1* and *NC2* are negatively contrasting concepts to *S*'s concept by looking back at the definition of a negatively contrasting concept provided in (NCC). Suppose that *S* knows (contrastively) the proposition

that $p(CVNC1VNC2VNC3V\dots)$. In order for R 's concept $NC1$ to negatively contrast with S 's concept $CVNC1VNC2VNC3V\dots$ at t , it would have to be the case that the proposition $p(NC1)$ is an epistemic counterpart for S at t of the proposition $p(CVNC1VNC2VNC3V\dots)$. But this condition clearly isn't satisfied. If S at t were to know the proposition that $p(NC1)$ instead of the proposition that $p(CVNC1VNC2VNC3V\dots)$, S would *not* be in a qualitatively indistinguishable state at t . This is because, on an individualist account of concepts, there could not be a difference between knowing two distinct propositions that did not show up at the subjective level. Hence R 's concept $NC1$ does not contrast negatively with S 's concept $CVNC1VNC2VNC3V\dots$ at t . Mutatis mutandis for $NC2$. This second sense of “ S cannot distinguish R 's concepts from her own”, then, is false. S *can* in fact distinguish her own concepts from those of R in this sense. Individualism does not allow for negatively contrasting concepts.

Aikin and Dabay are wrong to claim that my argument “depends on an elision of the fact of the contrastivity of self-knowledge with the requirement that all the contrasts can be made by the knowing subject” (2014b, 3). My argument does not depend on the assumption that a negatively contrasting concept must be possessed by the subject at the time, and does not depend on the assumption that all the contrasts can be made by the knowing subject at the time. Rather, my argument depends on a proper understanding of negatively contrasting concepts defined counterfactually in terms of indistinguishability at the subjective level. Contrastive self-knowledge entails anti-individualism.

Contact details: s.a.sawyer@sussex.ac.uk

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